

Appleby Archaeology Group November Meeting

There was standing room only when Appleby Archaeology Group welcomed professor Brian Roberts of Durham University to their November meeting. His subject was the Development of the English Village and how it related to villages in the Eden Valley.

Brian Roberts introduced his subject by referring to King Alfred the Great who had said that for a king to maintain power he “required men to fight, men to pray, and men to work”. He explained that both before and after the Norman Conquest the main resources came from the land and that had influenced how people had established homesteads and villages. He also stressed that England had been a slave economy during the early Middle Ages and people were a commercial assets.

He showed a diagram of the basic settlement. This would have started with a single farmstead which was often named after the man who had first lived there. An area would be cleared for crops and pasture. Later kinship clusters would have developed as smaller dwellings were built for relatives. In time further huts would be built, perhaps for slaves captured in a recent raid, perhaps for tenants and so kinship hamlets of the kind referred to in the Icelandic Sagas, came into existence. Fences were built around the dwellings separating them from the arable land and meadows. A second enclosing boundary would separate that improved land from the impoverished open land and woodland beyond.

From his life time research Brian Roberts had constructed maps which showed the distribution of nucleations (villages, hamlets and homesteads) across England in the early 17th century and mid-19th century. Areas with very sparse occupation corresponded to geographical features such as the Pennines, the Fens and the mountains of the Lake District. Three zones of settlement stood out on both maps: there was a central belt stretching from Dorset to Northumberland where there were numerous villages and then on either side were two areas where settlements were more dispersed. These patterns of nucleations can be traced back to the 12th century.

He then outlined his classification of village forms based on villages found in the central belt identifying two essential patterns of initial development. The farm and outbuildings (tofts) were arranged either in two rows with a central street or as an agglomeration, perhaps around a village green. The settlement would have been surrounded by fields divided into strips for the individual tofts. In many parts of the country the field length would have been a furlong and as social and economic changes took place and the

population increased surrounding areas would have been cleared and developed and divided into further strips. This pattern is found particularly east of the Pennines.

The pattern had not been followed to the same extent in villages in the Eden Valley where the strips tended to vary in length and could be as long as 800m. He mentioned Great Asby, as an example where the strips were 600m, much longer than a furlong (200m). The distribution of the strips also varied, as in Melmerby, where they were arranged in 4 blocks. He put forward a number of possible explanations including the nature of the landscape, the social conditions and the fact that Cumbria did not become part of Norman England until the invasion of William Rufus in 1092. There is evidence that the Normans brought in settlers from other parts of the country and may have established new communities that needed longer and larger crofts than was the norm elsewhere. His general conclusion was that settlement in the Eden Valley before 1092 was of dispersed farmsteads and hamlets but with the arrival of the Normans many of the villages in the Eden Valley were planned to the standard layout described above.

Professor Robert's interesting and often humorous talk led to many questions from the floor and lengthy discussion over coffee. The meeting was concluded with an appreciative vote of thanks.

The next meeting will be on the Tuesday 14th December at 7.30pm in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby when Ben Edwards will talk on *Pre Conquest Ironwork from-Winderwath Common*